

WYCOMBE BATTERED AT STORTFORD

WYCOMBE Wanderers' chances of winning the Rothmans Isthmian League title, the first of its kind with a £1,000 bonus, diminished considerably at Rhodes Avenue on Tuesday night when they went down to their closest rivals Bishop's Stortford 2-0.

DAVE BULLOCK
... almost scored

This encounter was the second part of a two-match programme that would almost certainly decide the title. Wycombe passed the first test with flying colours when they overhauled Hendon 2-0 at Loakes Park. But, in the end, they couldn't stand the pace and even their most partisan supporters must concede Stortford were the better side on the night and thoroughly deserved their three points.

If the Hertfordshire club do manage to clinch the championship this season — and they are firm favourites now — it will be on complete merit. This team has been playing three matches a week for over a month now and must be stringing passes together in their sleep.

UNDEFEATED

When one considers Stortford's achievements this season, a 2-0 reverse for Wanderers was not such a bad result. After all, they were facing a team that had gone undefeated for 30 consecutive matches and hadn't lost in the league since October 6. Add to that their first ever Amateur Cup victory and the fact that they managed to win the London Senior Cup final with only ten men 4-1 against Walton and one has a good measure of Stortford's calibre.

Stortford's football itself was not particularly impressive (I've

seen Wycombe play superior football several times this season) but it was highly efficient, and left little room for errors. Having kept his squad together for the whole season, manager Ted Hardy looked all set for the "Grand Slam" of amateur football. It would be a sensational ending for the amateurs, who go "open" next term.

But, although Wycombe's hopes of the championship have receded, they have not by any means disappeared for good. All it needs is one slip by Stortford and the Blues would be right back in with a chance. Looking at the Bishop's remaining matches — five in all — they have only one that seems easy on paper. Having beaten Hitchin four times this season, it would be only logical to expect them to make it a nap hand when they meet them at Rhodes Avenue next Tuesday.

Stortford met Leytonstone at home last night (Thursday) and next Thursday (6th) they have another crucial match at Hendon. On the Saturday they are home to Woking and their final match is an away visit to Walton and Hershams. That game will be played at Slough as Walton's Council-owned ground is unavailable after May 16.

Wanderers, with three matches left against Walton (Monday), Leytonstone away (Wednesday), and Leytonstone home next Saturday, will be looking anxiously for any Stortford slip but if the Herts club win all their remaining games, they should finish three points clear of Wycombe. In other words, Wycombe Wanderers can't win the title for themselves, they need the help of other teams.

By STUART EARP Bishop's Stortford 2, Wycombe Wanderers 0

Before the match the teams lined up in front of Stortford's biggest home crowd of the season, 3,600, to witness the presentation of the Man of the Match award to Dave Lawrence for his Amateur Cup final performance against Ilford. Manager Ted Hardy awarded the trophy.

The match was only four minutes old when the home side carved out their first chance, with full back Tony Gibson nodding down a cross to the far post for Peter Leakey to head just wide. The move had started with Bass flicking on a deep through ball — he was to repeat the move several times during the match.

Wycombe replied with a couple of sharp raids but on both occasions, Moore halted the moves with safe handling and both crosses being hit too close to the goalkeeper.

ONE UP

Then, with 17 minutes gone, Stortford went up, from a corner, a result of passing by Wycombe. Leakey drove in a curling flag kick to the six yard box aiming for the head on one man — Bass. The big striker didn't let them down. Losing the entire defence, he was given a free header as Maskell stayed on his line, thumping the ball joyously home to make it 1-0.

It was a deserved goal for the home side. Lawrence almost made it 2-0 a couple of minutes later shooting just wide of the post as Wycombe's back four stood and watched. Their indecision and lack of conviction could have cost them dearly. So often, Stortford were able to burst through the defensive cor-

don, given all the time they needed.

Under the pressure, distribution became ragged, the front runners (unlike Stortford) being given no time or space to instigate attacks. In midfield, Payne was spoiling many possible Wycombe raids. But after 26 minutes Perrin almost created a chance for himself when Moore dropped the ball under challenge but the Stortford defence managed to clear the ball away to safety. It was a rare first half chance for Wycombe.

At the other end Maskell and Keith Mead combined to hurriedly clear a header from John Dear off the line and in the 31st minute Tony Horseman had a difficult chance to pull back to 1-1. Paul Birdseye joined the attack and switched inside, creating a scoring opportunity for Horseman, but with little time to measure the ball, "Bodger" sent the ball over the top.

Stortford were soon pressing forward again. With 18 minutes gone, Maskell dived full length to keep out Dear's flick and only Mead's covering saved the day. A couple of minutes later, again Wycombe were paying for their lack of command inside their own penalty.

Considering the pressure, however, keeper Maskell emerged with honours. Making several fine saves, he had to contend with a mob of youths behind the goal, who threw countless toilet rolls onto the pitch. After John had almost filled his net with the paper, the situation became so bad, the referee asked for the loudspeakers to announce he would abandon the game if the

throwing of toilet rolls did not stop.

As half time approached Wycombe, it seemed as though the visitors would go into the dressing room only 0-1 down with everything to play for in the second half. Then, in the 44th minute, the home side hit their second goal. The killer score came after a series of headers inside the visitors area, with Dear eventually nodding the bouncing ball over Maskell and Mead on the goal-line. It was one of Stortford's most important goals of the whole campaign.

The half time situation provided a searching test for Wanderers. They needed to take a tight grip on the game if they were to make any impression. For 30 of the 45 minutes they did just that, forcing eight corners to Stortford's two. The home side managed to hold out — it was the crucial part of the match and had Wycombe managed to snail one back, I felt they had a chance to share the spoils. But it was not to be.

The chances were there for Wanderers in the second half but they went untaken. In the 53rd minute Perrin headed over the crossbar under heavy pressure from two defenders following a Holfield cross and then Bullock up for corner, saw his shot deflected for another flag kick. This time Bullock got his head to a poor Stortford clearance. The ball looked set for the back of the net until Moore flew across to tip the ball around the post for a third corner.

Perrin was again off target with a header in the 63rd minute and then Keith Seale, whose lack of match fitness was exposed for the first time since his

comeback, drove in about his only shot of the night which flew across the goal.

To their credit Wycombe were playing some attractive football, using Grant on the overlap and finding each other well. The final pass, however, was often off the mark or cut out by the defence. There was virtually nothing clear-cut for them.

Dear was lucky not to become Stortford's fifth booking of the season when he threw a punch at Birdseye after a tussle for the ball, referee Smith almost ignoring the incident and awarding a throw-in to Stortford.

Still pressing forward, Wycombe found the home defence in uncompromising form. Playing it tight at the back with big John Still a tower of strength, the Blues' forwards were simply outgunned. A free kick eight yards outside the home penalty area promised a Wycombe reply but Horseman, who seemed to be so lethal from these situations, sent the ball high, wide and not very handsome into the crowd.

Wanderers could have few complaints. It is a long time since they were the inferior side on the night, the F.A. Cup-tie against Peterborough probably being the last occasion. The race is not over yet, but on this form, Stortford look odds-on for the championship.

STORTFORD: T. Moore; A. Gibson, M. Smith, J. Still, A. Coombes, D. Lawrence, J. Payne, P. Leakey, J. Dear, A. Bass, P. Scott. Sub. P. Wash (not used).

WYCOMBE: J. Maskell; P. Birdseye, K. Mead, D. Bullock, R. Grant; L. Phipps, D. Moore. Sub. M. Holfield, A. Horseman, K. Seale, S. Perrin. Sub. P. Wood (not used).

Referee: D. Smith (Hornchurch).

Half time: 2-0. Goalscorers, Stortford — Bass (17), Dear (44). **Official paying attendance:** 3,200. **Approximate total attendance:** 3,600.



JOHN STILL
... tower of strength



TONY BASS
... first goal



DAVE BULLOCK
... almost scored



JOHN MASKELL
... honours